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Your Turn

Rutgers Preserve makes a great destination

Michelle Byers

There's only so much you can learn about the natural world from a book. Like students in so many other sciences and disciplines, those who want to study plants, animals, ecosystems and how they interact benefit from having a lab as part of the educational experience. Students at Rutgers University - and anyone else who enjoys a walk in the woods - are fortunate to have an excellent "lab-without-walls" in the 370-acre Rutgers Ecological Preserve and Natural Teaching Area.

The Preserve is located in the Middlesex County towns of Piscataway, Highland Park and Edison, between the Rutgers Livingston and Busch campuses and the county's Johnson Park along the Raritan riverfront. It contains a roughly 100-acre section of old-growth forest - part of Kilmer Woods, named after poet Joyce Kilmer. The remaining 270 acres of the preserve are made up of grasslands, fence rows and younger forest regenerating from former farmland.

Rutgers has used the property as a living laboratory since 1955, after the government finished using it for Camp Kilmer, a major staging area for troops coming and going during World War II. The university acquired the land as a donation from the Johnson family in 1964, and formally designated it as a preserve in 1976.

Walking through the preserve, it's easy to see why Joyce Kilmer was moved to write his famous poem "think I shall never see, a poem as lovely as a tree." The forested section of the preserve is big enough and intact enough to function as interior forest. Recorded reports from as far back as 1848 indicate the woodlands have been largely unaltered since before 1840. Today, white ash, northern red oak, sugar maple, black oak and white oak are the dominant species. Flowering dogwood and maple saplings make up the majority of the understory. Seasonal ground cover varies from early spring's mayapple to Japanese honeysuckle and Virginia creeper in late summer.

Two streams flow through the preserve on their way to the Raritan: Buell Brook, which flows through the old forest section, and Metlars Brook, which forms much of the preserve's western boundary.

All this untrammelled woodland is home to a vast array of wildlife, from fish in the stream, to reptiles along their banks, to mammals among the trees and insects hiding in the grasslands. Over 150 species of birds have been documented there, including flocks of American goldfinch (how nice of New Jersey State birds to visit the state university!). As a major green patch along the Atlantic flyway, the preserve is an important stopover for migratory birds.

Intertwined with the streams is a network of trails that runs all through the preserve, making it a perfect, picturesque setting for a jog, a hike, a mountain bike ride, or a leisurely walk through the woods to enjoying all that nature has to offer.

The Friends of the Rutgers Ecological Preserve (FREP) is a grassroots citizens' group dedicated to protecting the preserve. You can learn more about the preserve, and FREP's efforts to protect and care for this natural treasure at www.freporg.org. And I hope you'll contact me at info@njconservation.org or visit NJCF's Web site at www.njconservation.org for more information about conserving New Jersey's precious land and natural resources.

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